

SAN FRANCISCO BAY CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

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TO: All Design Review Board Members

FROM: Will Travis, Executive Director [415/352-3653 travis@bcdc.ca.gov]
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SUBJECT: 2555 Pulgas Avenue, City of East Palo Alto, San Mateo County;
Second Pre-Application Review
(For Board consideration on February 11, 2008)

Project Summary

Project Sponsors: City of East Palo Alto Redevelopment Agency and Garlock and Associates, Inc.

Project Representatives: Curtis Gaspard, Garlock and Associates, Inc.; Tony Carrasco, Carrasco & Associates, Architects; Matthew Gaber, OMG Landscape Architecture; Howard Pierce, Wilsey Ham Engineers.

Project Site. The proposed development would be located on an existing 6.5-acre light industrial site in the northeast portion of the City of East Palo Alto within a district known as the Ravenswood Industrial Area. The project site is approximately one-half mile east of U.S. Highway 101, on the north side of Bay Road, and at the end of Pulgas Avenue. To the west, south, and east of the site are existing industrial warehouses, to the north of the site is a low-lying drainage ditch with existing marsh vegetation, and to the northeast of the site is the Ravenswood Open Space Preserve. Farther west of the project site is an existing residential neighborhood and the City of Palo Alto. The site is currently vacant with the exception of several industrial buildings on its western edge. In 2000, the *East Palo Alto Revitalization Plan* identified the Ravenswood Industrial Area as an area to be transformed into the Ravenswood Business District that would accommodate a mix of commercial, industrial and residential uses.

Proposed Project. The proposed project involves the construction of 80 new live-work units, a community green and community building at the center of the project site, a community open space to the north of the project site, and several Bay trail segments connecting the project site to the east, west and north. The project also proposes three new public streets, which are named East, West and South Streets for reference purposes. It is anticipated that South Street would later connect to Tara Road, which sits east of Pulgas Avenue, once the property to the east is developed. The proposed live-work units would consist of 59, three-story units and 21, four-story units. The three-story units would be approximately 39 feet high and located along the southern ends of West and East Streets and along North Street, facing the Bay. The four-story units would be approximately 43 feet high; 12 units would be located at the northern end of West Street and 9 units would be located at the northern end of East Street. At the end of Pulgas Avenue, the gateway to the project site, an approximately 1,000-square-foot, eleven-foot, six-inch-high community building is proposed within the community green. An approximately 1,274-square-foot playground with benches would be located just north of the community building within the community green.

Public Access. The proposed public access improvements for this project include:



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1. An approximately 21,279-square-foot community green located in the center of the project site, at the end of Pulgas Avenue. The community green would be approximately 58 feet wide and run from the end of Pulgas Avenue and connect to the east-west Bay Trail path to the north of the project site.
2. An approximately 33-foot-wide view corridor from Pulgas Avenue, through the community green to the Bay and shoreline to the north, as well as view corridors along East and West streets.
3. An approximately 46,586-square-foot community open space area located north of the project site that would include an informal play and sports area, an overlook, and a rain water garden for wetland habitat and storm water filtration and detention. The community open space would include picnic tables, barbecues, benches, and lighting.
4. A series of public access trails running east-west and north-south through the project site, including: (1) a 12-foot-wide paved Bay Trail path running east-west along the northern edge of the property with public access signage; (2) an eight-foot-wide path along the western edge of the community green connecting Pulgas Avenue to the east-west Bay Trail path, allowing a future north Bay Trail connection; and (3) a five-foot-wide path along the eastern edge of the community green.

Prior Board Review and Comments. The Design Review Board reviewed this project at its December 10, 2007 meeting in East Palo Alto and commented on five particular aspects of the public access design, including: (1) the location of the four-story units; (2) the possible view impacts from the community building; (3) the lack of an “enticing sequence” leading the public towards the shoreline and Bay; (4) the proposed and possible future public access connections; and (5) more detail on the proposed shoreline elevations. Below is the project sponsors’ response to each of the Board’s comments. The Board’s advice is sought on whether the project sponsors’ responses adequately address the Board’s prior comments.

1. **Prior Board Comment Regarding the Four-Story Units (Unit B):** *The Board is concerned that the placement of the four-story units along the shoreline may impact visual access along the Bay Trail.*

Project Sponsors’ Response: (Please see Sheets A1.2, A7 and A8). The project sponsors have re-evaluated the placement of the previously sited four-story units (Unit B) along the shoreline. The previous design included four-story units along North Street that faced the Bay Trail and the Ravenswood Open Space. The project sponsors have replaced these four-story units with three-story units (Unit A) in order to “improve the pedestrian character along the Community Open Space and Bay Trail by decreasing the building massing.” The project sponsors have also reconfigured the placement of four-story units along the northern ends of West and East Streets in order to “create a more balanced street façade and building massing” and “improve the view from the Bay Trail”. The previous design included one, four-story unit at the northern end of West Street and six at the northern end of East Street. The revised site plan includes twelve at the northern end of West Street and nine at the northern end of East Street.

2. **Prior Board Comment Regarding the Community Building:** *The Board is concerned that the proposed location of the community building and the landscaping surrounding the building may impact views of the Bay from Pulgas Avenue and create an impediment that may not lead the public out to the Bay and shoreline. The Board requested that the project sponsors return with a set of specific design principles that support the siting of the community building in its current location.*

Project Sponsors' Response: (Please see Sheets A3, L1.4 and L1.6). The project sponsors believe that the location of the community building at the end of Pulgas Avenue will “activate this gateway space and serve the neighborhood node as an anchor point”. The project sponsors state, “[t]his location provides a sense of safety and ownership for the central community open space and playground” and “community members and the City of East Palo Alto requested that the community building be situated centrally at the end of Pulgas Avenue and be treated as a focal point for the adjacent Ravenswood neighborhood.” The project sponsors fear that without the community building at this location, the community green will “remain vacant and devoid of social inhabitation” as is often found at other residential housing developments in East Palo Alto.

3. **Prior Board Comment Regarding Entryway and Connection to the Bay:** *The Board is concerned that the proposed site plan may not adequately lead the public out to the Bay and shoreline.*

Project Sponsors' Response: (Please see Sheets A0.1, L1.4, L1.6 and A6). The project sponsors have revised the site plan to “provide an enticing landscape sequence of special elements and materials to define the space that leads pedestrians out to the marshes.” This includes an arrival court with a nautical gateway element and entrance trellis at the end of Pulgas Avenue, which would be specially paved with crushed oyster shells. Southwest of the community building would lie the arrival plaza which would be inspired by images of the coastal salt marsh and include free-standing educational exhibits describing the history of the Bay. The playground to the north of the community building would contain nautical-themed playground equipment, linking the playground with the nautical gateway at the arrival court. The project sponsors have removed the diagonal line of spine trees that previously surrounded the community building to “create a more open vista out to the shoreline...”. The project sponsors have also introduced more seating within the gathering space in front of the community building. The project sponsors state that additional east-west streets and shorter block lengths were considered earlier in the conceptual design process. However, the City of East Palo Alto and community members “expressed their desire for a significant central green space for community facilities as well as recreational uses” and feared that “the configuration of shorter blocks results in more asphalt and blind corners” with “fewer ‘eyes on the street’ and unwelcome opportunities for youths to race their vehicles around corners creating unsafe conditions for pedestrians.”

4. **Prior Board Comment Regarding Public Access Connections:** *The Board is interested in seeing how the proposed public access trails at the site tie into future connections to the Ravenswood Open Space Preserve.*

Project Sponsors' Response: (Please see Sheets L1.3 and L1.5). The proposed access trail begins at the end of Pulgas Avenue and continues north through the centrally located Community Green and through the Community Open Space to the far north of the site. The project sponsors state, “[w]e have provided for a connection to the future trail through the privately-owned future Redevelopment site situated directly to the north of our site; this future trail to be completed by others, would provide a direct connection to the Ravenswood Open Space Preserve.” The proposed trail then turns both east and west to connect to shared trailheads with the proposed Tara Street development to the east of the project site and any future development at Demeter Street, west of the project site. The project sponsors believe that the proposed trails provide access that connects to an existing trail network as well as any possible future connections.

5. **Prior Board Comment Regarding Shoreline Elevations and Buildings.** *The Board requested that the project sponsors provide more shoreline elevations that depict the verticality of the shoreline buildings and the rainwater garden.*

Project Sponsors' Reponse: (Please see Sheets L1.7, L1.8 and A7). Additional information, including cross sections of the rainwater garden, the Community Open Space and the proposed live-work units, have been provided. These elevations have been provided to address how the site will accommodate sea level rise.